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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HONDURAN SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM - EFFECTIVE, GROWING,  
AND ATTRACTING PRIVATE SECTOR SUPPORT.

1. EconOff and intern attended a donation event on March 23 at the Clarion Hotel, hosted by the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) and Clover Brand, a Honduran private corporation specializing in cooking oil and butter. Clover donated a sum of \$335,200 for food products to the School Lunch Program in the department of Intibuca, in western Honduras, where malnutrition has reached 72% of the infant population. This is the first sizable private company donation to the School Lunch Program in Honduras.

2. Representatives from the World Food Program and the GOH, including the Honduran Minister of the Presidency, Luis Cosenza, described the benefits of the school lunch program coordinated by the GOH and WFP in rural (and some urban) areas throughout the country. The school lunch funding promotes improved school attendance by children from poor families, contributes to higher nutrition levels, and stimulates student attention. In addition, about 500,000 parents of children in departments benefiting from the Lunch Program have formed committees to prepare meals for children. The WFP supplies school districts with food and products for preparation, including rice, corn, beans, and cooking oil, to cover basic nutritional standards.

3. Cosenza underscored the importance of the program and the GOH's appreciation for this new private sector involvement. Before the Maduro administration, the Lunch Program only covered about 55,000 children and the WFP was not involved in the effort. The GOH funding has expanded since Maduro took office in 2002 to 70% coverage of school districts, more than 600,000 children in 8,000 schools in 18 departments. Cosenza also noted that this donation by Clover to the school lunch program will benefit more than 10,000 students in 120 schools of Intibuca for one year, which will work to reduce the high level of student dropouts in the area. Another major priority of the program is for children to complete grade school. To this end, the GOH is investing 240 million lempiras in the Lunch Program in Honduras, but is seeking more private sector donations to expand the program.

4. Comment: The School Lunch Program is one of the most valuable poverty reduction projects in Honduras -- simultaneously improving school attendance, child nutrition, and cohesiveness in rural communities. Intibuca school officials told us that school attendance has tripled since the institution of school lunches, and they are now scrambling to find the resources to add more classrooms and teachers to fill the demand. However, the program is threatened by resource cuts. The World Food Program in Honduras, as in other Central American countries, did not receive FY04 funding for school lunches because of cutbacks in U.S. McGovern-Dole appropriations. GOH funds and private donations will only be able to fill a part of this gap. End Comment.

Palmer